

Insurgency in Greater Baluchistan

A CNA Small Group Discussion

March 29, 2013



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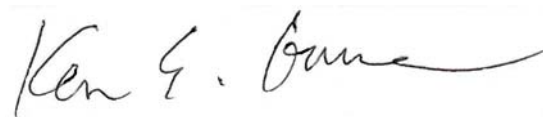
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14. ABSTRACT In the 19th century, national boundaries in South Asia were delineated without regard to greater Baluchistan. Today, the Baluch, who may number as many as 15 million, live as too often marginalized and disaffected minorities in Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Successive generations of Baluch have waged armed rebellion against outside rule. Pakistan's military and intelligence services consider Baluch insurgency an existential threat to the state and counter it with all possible force. Iranian officials have recently demonstrated greater flexibility in dealing with the Baluch. Indeed, Iran is utilizing Dar-ul-Uloom, the Sunni Deobandi University in Zahedan, as an instrument of "soft power" to project Iranian influence. The national government is little present in Baluch areas in southwestern Afghanistan where Baluch smugglers have helped supply the insurgency against US forces and transported opium on behalf of powerful drug networks linked to the Taliban. In addition, China is partnering with Pakistan and India with Iran to develop competing ports and regional transportation networks from greater Baluchistan into Central Asia.					
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Background

Baluchistan, one of the most remote and least developed areas of southwest Asia, stretches north from Karachi in Pakistan, along the arid and craggy Makran coast into Iran and southern Afghanistan. The origins of the Baluch people are obscure. According to legend, the Baluch and the Kurds emigrated from a common home in Aleppo seeking pastureland and fresh water. Semi-nomadic pastoralists, the Baluch draw their primary identity not from a common language but from affiliation to their clan chiefs known as sardars. Most Baluch are Sunni Muslims.

Like the Kurds in the Levant, the Baluch lost out when colonial powers, in this case the British Raj, delineated national boundaries. In the late 19th century, the British settled the borders between India, Persia, and Afghanistan without regard to tribal populations. As a result, the Baluch, who may now number as many as 15 million, live as too-often marginalized and disaffected minorities in Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. On March 29, 2013, CNA convened a small group of current and former officials, military officers, and regional experts to discuss the history and future potential of insurgency in Greater Baluchistan and the implications for U.S. interests and regional stability.

Bottom line up front

- Successive generations of ethnic Baluch living along Pakistan's west and northwest borders with Iran and Afghanistan have waged armed rebellion against rule from Islamabad. Pakistan's military and intelligence services consider Baluch insurgency a greater existential threat to the state than the Taliban. Efforts to crush the Baluch have failed. While a majority of Pakistani Baluch prefer more autonomy and economic development over independence, Islamabad must now contend with a Baluch opposition which is young, urban, and middle class –the same demographic which sparked Arab Spring demonstrations in the Middle East.
- Islamic Republic officials have recently demonstrated flexibility in dealing with the Iranian Baluch. While ruthlessly pursuing Baluch jihadi groups, Tehran has slackened some controls and

is utilizing Dar-ul-Uloom, the Sunni Deobandi university in Zahedan, as an instrument of “soft power” to project Iranian influence in the states of former Soviet Central Asia.

- Utilizing ancient trading routes, the Baluch serve as a major regional conduit of licit and illicit goods. Baluch smugglers have helped supply the insurgency against U.S. forces in Afghanistan and transported opium from southern Afghanistan through Iran and Pakistan to the sea, enriching powerful drug networks linked to the Taliban. The empowerment of these networks is a threat to civil society in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as to the interests of the U.S. and NATO.
- In a potentially destabilizing reprise of “the Great Game,” China is partnering with Pakistan, and India with Iran, to develop competing ports and regional transportation networks from greater Baluchistan into Central Asia.

Baluch insurgency in Pakistan

The majority of Baluch live in what is now Pakistan where the Baluch state achieved its greatest extent from 1741 to 1805 during the reign of the seventh Khan of Kalat, Nasir Khan. The Khanate¹ has remained a symbol of Baluch nationalism. Under British rule in the 19th century, the Baluch enjoyed considerable autonomy. At the time of the dissolution of the Raj in 1947, there was an agreement to recognize Kalat as a free and independent state. But during the tumultuous period of partition of the sub-continent, exactly who agreed to what and whether they had the authority to do so is murky. The Khan of Kalat, Yar Khan, declared independence in August 1947 and the newly formed government of Pakistan immediately repudiated that declaration.

¹ The issue of Baluch sovereignty is further complicated by the fact that in 1784, Nasir Khan gave the territory around the port of Gwadar to the then exiled-Sultan of Oman. The Omanis ruled Gwadar until 1958, when Pakistan purchased it for \$3 million from Sultan Said bin Taimur, father of the present Omani monarch. About 14 percent of Oman’s current population are Baluch. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Baluch subjects of the Sultan settled in his realms in East Africa and the Trucial States, notably Bahrain.

Faced with continued resistance from Yar Khan, the Pakistan Army was sent in April 1948 to compel the incorporation of the Khanate into Pakistan. Prince Abdul Karim, Yar Khan's younger brother, escaped across the border into Afghanistan with a force of 700 men to carry on guerilla warfare. Abdul Karim was eventually persuaded to halt his insurgency and was promised amnesty. On returning to Kalat, Abdul Karim and his fighters were captured and imprisoned — the first of a sad succession of insurgencies and broken agreements between the government of Pakistan and the Baluch.

Depending on one's point of view, armed Baluch resistance has been carried out over the years by traitorous Baluch terrorists and criminals, or by valorous Baluch tribal leaders seeking greater autonomy or independence from a central government which persecutes them. The pattern of Baluch insurgency met by a heavy-handed response from the Pakistan Army has been repeated at intervals over the course of Pakistan's 66-year history.

The bloodiest of the insurgent uprisings in Baluchistan occurred from 1973 to 1978, in response to Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's dismissal of the provincial government. The 1971 revolt of East Bengal province, now Bangladesh, both inspired the Baluch and strengthened the Pakistan Army's resolve to quash further insurgency. At the peak of the war, approximately 80,000 Pakistan Army troops served in Baluchistan. A critical battle occurred in September 1974, when Pakistani ground forces, supported by Mirage jets and AH-1 Cobra attack helicopters, attacked 1,500 Baluch fighters in the plains of Chamalang. The remnants of the Baluch force retreated across the border into Afghanistan. General Zia al-Haq overthrew Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1977 and executed him. Following the Zia government's release of 11,000 Baluch prisoners and another promise of amnesty, the insurgency again subsided.

Under the civilian governments of Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto in the 1990s, Pakistani Baluch made significant progress, participating in democratically elected national and provincial elections and garnering enough electoral support to control the government of Baluchistan province. But Baluch parties suffered serious reversals in the 2002 elections as a result of electoral rigging by the government of General Pervez Musharraf who had carried out a coup d'état in 1999 against Nawaz Sharif. With their leaders ruled ineligible to par-

ticipate in politics and their grievances still unaddressed, the Baluch again erupted in violence in 2005.

In response, the Pakistan Army undertook a massive counter-insurgency campaign targeting the influential Bugti tribe, led by Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, an Oxford-educated former governor of Baluchistan province. When the army shelled his ancestral home in Dera Bugti, Akbar Khan Bugti who was then about 80 years old, fled with his grandson, Barahumdag, and dozens of tribesmen. The army eventually tracked them into the hills. Following three days of bombardment, Akbar Khan Bugti was declared dead, entombed in the rubble of his cave hideout. His grandson, Barahumdag, some tribesmen, and family members escaped into Afghanistan. Barahumdag was eventually granted asylum in Switzerland.

Pakistan military's perspective on Baluch insurgency

A former officer in the U.S. military familiar with Pakistani military thinking pointed out that Pakistan's national military strategy calculus considers Baluch "separatism" a serious threat to the nation's security – less critical than the threat from India but certainly of far greater concern than "tribal exceptionalism" in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The officer was confident that the Pakistani leadership would continue to provide the military with whatever resources it needed to ensure that Baluchistan remained a Pakistan province. The natural gas field in the Sui area is a vital energy asset and, as yet only partially exploited mineral deposits, an important potential source of national wealth. The new Chinese-funded port in Gwadar is the second largest port in Pakistan and the projected nexus of road, rail, and pipeline development linking the southern Arabian Sea coast with China's Xinjiang province. A natural gas pipeline currently under construction in Iran will traverse Baluchistan, bringing energy urgently needed for power generation in Pakistan.

While Baluchistan province provides Pakistan with strategic military depth from a potential attack by India from the south, India's increasingly close relationship with Iran and Afghanistan stokes fears of encirclement in Islamabad. India and Iran are developing the port of Chabahar as an alternative to Gwadar and building roads and railways through the Baluch areas of southeastern Iran and southwest Afghan-

istan to connect with Afghanistan's Ring Road and the trade routes to Central Asia.

Pakistani military assets in Baluchistan province are considerable. The army, air force, navy, and coast guard all maintain a presence in the province with the army the most significant service branch. The Pakistan Army's XII Corps, commanded by a three-star general, is based in Quetta and is responsible for the province. A series of Pakistan Army cantonments provide additional security. Recently, the Pakistan Army has been conducting educational and infrastructure development projects with local communities based on the army's counter-insurgency concept of Dialogue (Pakistan-ize), Development (Create Profit Centers), and Deterrence (Pacify). Baluch opposition is dealt with ruthlessly. Pakistani intelligence and the Frontier Corps have been accused of assassinating and disappearing hundreds (Baluch activists say thousands) of Baluch political figures, journalists, and social leaders.

Addressing Baluch grievances

"The resilience of Baluch nationalism," as one CNA meeting participant bluntly stated, "results from the persistent economic and social inequalities among Pakistan's provinces that have been exacerbated by military repression and massive violations of human rights." Efforts at economic development in the province have largely benefitted non-Baluch, with China's Gwadar port project a prime example. Baluch protest that revenues from the province's Sui natural gas field and other natural resources are not fairly distributed. The new, educated Baluch middle class is underrepresented in the Pakistani military and government, and systematic disenfranchisement of Baluch political parties eliminates their participation in the electoral process. A Gallup survey undertaken in July 2012 for DIFD, the UK foreign assistance agency, showed that 37 percent of the Baluch respondents in Pakistan favored independence – a minority but, nevertheless, a significant one. Experts at the CNA meeting predicted that, absent a good-faith effort to address Baluch grievances, moderate Baluch leaders could be pushed further to the extreme. Much of the Baluch opposition today is young, urban, and middle class – a change from the 1970s, when the opposition was mainly rural.

Baluch insurgency in Iran

Direct Persian control over “West Baluchistan,” Baluch territory within what is now Iran, was achieved in the late 19th century by the Qajar dynasty. But it was Reza Pahlavi, crowned Shah in 1925, who set about creating a centrally administered state and imposing a Persian national identity. The Baluch did reasonably well under the secular Pahlavi regime, which allowed them limited self-government on the periphery of the empire. Two events in 1979 brought about major change in the Baluch relationship with the state. Following the overthrow of the Shah and the founding of the Islamic Republic, the preeminence of Shi’ism as the state’s official creed put Iranian Sunni interests at odds with those of the Islamic Revolution. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, also in 1979, gave new strategic significance to Sistan-Baluchistan, on Iran’s border with Afghanistan and Pakistan. Thousands of refugees from Afghanistan fled into Iran, swelling the population of the province, while Western and Gulf aid to the Afghan mujahideen greatly expanded the smuggling trade which had long sustained the Baluch throughout the region. Civilian and military operatives of the Islamic Republic moved to tighten political control of Sistan-Baluchistan and to profit from the economic opportunities.

Decades of state violence against the Baluch Sunnis followed. The years 1983-1995 were marked by numerous assassinations of Sunni leaders. But, as a prominent European scholar who participated in the CNA meeting pointed out, Mawlana Abd al-Aziz Mollazadeh (1916-1987), the Baluch religious leader and founder of the Jamiah Dar-ul- Uloom Deobandi university in Zadehan, never broke with Tehran. In the expert’s view, Mawlana Abd al-Azziz’s “vector toward the center” allowed him to be an interlocutor with Tehran and to defend and even expand the rare space allocated within the Islamic Republic for alternative religious identities and practices. Jamiah Dar-ul-Uloom, founded in 1971 with six teachers and about 60 students, is now the preeminent Sunni institution in Southwest Asia, with more than 1,200 students. Via its religious training and translation of texts from the original Urdu into Farsi and Arabic, Dar-ul-Uloom has become a major transmitter of Deobandi thought.

Iranian Baluch have consistently voted “green” in national elections supporting Khatami in 1997, Mo’in in 2005, and Karoubi or Mousavi in 2009. But, following the strategy of his predecessor, Mawlana Ab-

dul Hameed, the current leader of Jamiah Dar-ul-Uloom, urged the community to recognize the re-election of Ahmadinejad and that pragmatism has paid off. The European scholar argued that to prevent a “Sunni Spring” in Iran, Tehran has slackened off on some controls and is utilizing Dar-ul-Uloom as an instrument of soft power to project Iranian influence in the Arab world and the states of the former Soviet Union in Central Asia.

This strategy of cooption appears to be working, successfully dampening Baluch popular support for insurgency. Dar-ul-Uloom joined the government in denouncing Jundallah (Soldiers of God, also known as the Iranian People’s Resistance Movement), an extremist group claiming to champion the cause of the Sunni minority. Jundallah, led by Abdul Malik Rigi and made up largely of members of his Rigi tribe, carried out a series of terrorist attacks in Sistan-Baluchistan beginning in 2003. Pakistan extradited to Iran Abdul Hamid Rigi, a brother of Abdul Malik Rigi in 2008, and in 2010 Abdul Malik was captured. Both Rigi brothers were executed. Before his death, Abdul Malik Rigi confessed on Iranian television that he was in the pay of the Americans, an assertion denied by the United States.

Elements of Jundallah tried to reconstitute the organization but how viable it is at present is uncertain. Iranian media claim that the security forces of the Islamic Republic continue to dismantle “Jundallah-affiliated terrorist groups.” In recent weeks, an organization called Harkat e Ansar (Iran) has begun to advertise itself via an impressively slick blog in Farsi, Arabic, and English as including many men from Jundallah. Participants in the CNA meeting noted that since the insurgent groups have not found wide support in Iranian Baluchistan, they are now affecting a Salafi-jihadi character, framing their conflict in terms of a larger Islamic struggle in a clear effort to appeal to potential Sunni donors in the Gulf and beyond.

Baluch insurgency in Afghanistan

A significant number of Afghan Baluch have joined the Taliban as foot soldiers. Most of these men were young and poor, and seem to have joined the movement for the same reason as many Pashtun men with few prospects. Nonetheless, few Baluch have risen to prominence within the Taliban leadership. Most Afghan Baluch who have attained positions of power have done so through positions in gov-

ernment. Today the governors of Nimrus (Omar Baluch) and Helmand (Naeem Baluch) provinces are Baluch. The Baluch as a whole, especially their leaders, have shown little inclination to support the Pashtun nationalist Taliban.

There have been sporadic reports of separatists from Pakistani Baluchistan operating training camps in Afghanistan, but little in the way of separatist violence in Afghanistan itself. In the 1970s, the Afghan government under President Daoud allowed Baluch separatists to operate training camps in southern Afghanistan during the height of their insurgency against the Pakistani military. The Pakistani government has also claimed that Baluch separatists have found sanctuary in Afghanistan under President Karzai and have trained in houses near Kandahar city. It does not appear that the Kabul government extended any material support to these individuals.

Unlike in Pakistan and Iran, the Baluch in Afghanistan have had little reason to secede from Kabul. The writ of the state has never reached to the Baluch areas of Afghanistan. Unlike in Pakistani Baluchistan, there are no major Afghan military bases in the Baluch areas of the country. Nor has there been any effort to extract the natural resources that exist there. There are large deposits of uranium, rare earth minerals, and possibly copper and gold in southern Helmand near the border with Pakistan. Almost nothing has been done about these minerals, because the region is so remote and the infrastructure on both sides of the border is almost non-existent. Finally, there are only 600,000-700,000 Baluch (estimates vary) in Afghanistan, compared to 1-2 million in Iran and 8-9 million in Pakistan – hardly enough to launch a significant rebellion.

Like many ethno-linguistic groups that straddle remote border regions, the Afghan Baluch have a long history of smuggling. Baluch smugglers have been involved in the movement of weapons into southern Afghanistan, helping fuel the Taliban insurgency there. For this reason Western forces in Afghanistan have frequently looked on Baluch smuggling networks as Taliban facilitators or even supporters. Baluch smugglers have also served as important middle-men in the opium trade, which has become a multi-billion dollar business (\$4 billion in 2007) over the last decade and a major source of financing for the Taliban. Much of this opium is moved south through Baluch

areas of southwest Afghanistan and onward through Pakistani and Iranian Baluchistan.

Baram Chah, a small town in the far south of Helmand, is a well-known transit point for opium and is also known for heroin processing labs. U.S. and British forces have launched numerous operations hoping to shut down the trade but have repeatedly failed – due in large part to the remoteness of the place. It was impossible to station enough forces there to maintain presence. The town is almost 200 kilometers from central Helmand, where Western and Afghan forces are clustered. The area is equally remote on the Pakistani side. Pakistani paramilitary posts near the border with southwest Afghanistan are often vacant and used by insurgents and smugglers as way stations. There is little communication between Pakistani and Afghan border forces in the region.

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